



University of Sussex
History

History Dissertation Guide

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1. What is a dissertation?

For many of you the dissertation will be the most exciting, challenging and ultimately rewarding piece of work completed during your time at Sussex. It provides a chance to engage in independent research on a topic of your choice, and to develop your own ideas and arguments based on the primary materials of the time. This is what professional historians do, and for those of you interested in pursuing the study of history further, this will be the sort of work you do at graduate level. It is worth 30 credits, and so also makes a substantial contribution to your final degree classification.

A dissertation is not a longer version of a coursework essay. A coursework essay often relies heavily on the conclusions of others, even if the best essays then go on to offer their own interpretations of the evidence. Like a coursework essay, a dissertation **MUST** show a sound grasp of the secondary literature on the topic, but crucially it is also based on the evaluation of primary sources.

A dissertation also needs to have an argument. It is not enough to synthesize the arguments of others, but you need to make up your own mind about the topic based on your reading of the primary sources.

Finally, you need to situate your argument/s within the context of the existing historiography. 'Historiography' is the writing of history, so in other words, you need to situate your

argument/s within the context of existing historical work. What have other historians said about the broader themes around your topic? Your dissertation may try to fill a gap within the current secondary literature; it may consider competing historical arguments on a particular topic; it may test an argument that has already been put forward with regard to a different time/place; it may challenge existing arguments.

2. Teaching

Normally, you will be writing a dissertation on a topic related to your Special Subject. You will receive a total of three hours supervision from your supervisor and will have your first meeting with them early in term one.

You can expect to meet with your supervisor regularly during terms one and two. This will not be weekly, but you should meet or make contact with them at least five or six times each term. Teaching methods vary. Some tutors will mainly meet with you on an individual basis; others will mainly meet you in a group. You are likely to receive a bit of both. A supervisor's role is to give advice on your research and comment upon your argument in plan form.

Supervisors are not allowed to read drafts of your dissertation. They are, however, permitted to read up to 10% of the final work. This means no more than 800 words, and you can discuss with your supervisor about the best way of doing this. It may mean the submission of a detailed plan or introduction.

3. Timetable

Below is a suggested timetable for planning your dissertation workload. Most important is that by the end of the spring term you have carried out the vast majority of your research, drafted your argument and, ideally, have some rough drafts of parts of the dissertation. It is very important that you do not leave yourself with research still to do for your dissertation while also trying to revise for exams.

| <i>When?</i> | <i>What?</i> |
|------------------|--|
| Term one: | Start thinking about possible topics – aim to have a clear idea of the area that you want to research by mid-term. |
| Mid-term: | Start reading the existing secondary literature. Locate whereabouts of primary sources |
| Late term: | Narrow down topic and think about research aims and Objectives Submit dissertation proposal and receive feedback. |
| Christmas break: | Carry out the bulk of the primary research |
| Early term two: | Carry on with secondary reading Begin to formulate your key arguments Complete primary research |
| Mid-term: | Start writing |
| End of term two: | You have completed a first draft |
| Spring break: | Draft and redraft |

4. Choosing a topic

You must choose to write about something that interests you. A dissertation requires a substantial amount of time and effort. If you get bored of the subject then you'll find it difficult to motivate yourself.

The topic must be of a manageable size. Many students initially choose a topic that is too big to be covered in the available time. Remember you only really have a term to complete the research, on top of your other work. Your tutor can help you narrow down a topic and advise you on what is realistic.

The topic must be practical. Where are the archives located? If the bulk of the research materials are in London and you can't/don't want to travel regularly then you need to find a topic that you can research locally.

The topic must allow you to show originality in your work. This doesn't necessarily mean that you have to choose a topic that no-one else has ever written on, or that you have to use sources that no-one else has ever used, but don't choose something so well-trodden that you can't find anything original to say about it.

When you have a broad topic area, you then need to think about defining your aims, objectives and research questions within that.

5. Choosing a title

Remember that – initially at least – your title can be flexible. Use a working title to start with, as you'll often find that your ideas, argument and approach may shift as your research progresses.

Your final title should summarise the research project, identifying the scope of the study, the main subject, and any concepts or debates central to the study. However, it should not be too long or overly specific. You can give more detail in your introduction and specify the precise approach to the topic.

For example:

- 'Hook, line and sinker? A study of astrology and popular belief in England 1937-47'
- 'Homosexuality beyond the metropolis: queer identity in 'provincial' post-war Britain 1952-1955.'

You must confirm the title with your dissertation supervisor. You then need to get a title registration form from the HAHP School Office, fill it in and get your supervisor to sign it. The current Rules and Regulations states that the title must be agreed before the end of the course with the course tutor. This form protects you, once it has been signed, that the subject of your dissertation is an appropriate one for a history undergraduate to be investigating. Don't leave this until the last moment or you may find that your supervisor is not around to sign the title registration form.

6. Using primary and secondary sources

Primary Sources

A primary source is any contemporaneous evidence relating to your topic. This encompasses both the written and spoken word, published and unpublished materials, and visual materials.

The most usual primary sources used are: Parliamentary Papers; government publications;

contemporary social investigation, surveys or comment; contemporary essays and monographs; oral accounts; letters; diaries; memoirs; contemporary records of organizations; films; painting; poems; and photographs. A specific historical text could also be a primary source if the objective of the analysis is the development of ideas.

Most dissertations will use several types of primary source, and a variety of published and unpublished ('manuscript') material. You also need to be aware of any limitations of your sources. How were they collected or produced and by whom? Do they give a complete picture? If not, what do they leave out? Can you realistically combat these defects? If not, explain any possible problems in the dissertation: your conclusions need to take these problems into account.

Finding Primary Sources

Look at the bibliographies used by other historians. What sources have they used and where did they locate them?

There are also various databases you can use to track down primary sources. Most archives have their own websites, but also take some time to explore the following:

Access to Archives: www.a2a.org.uk

This database catalogues the contents of many (though not all) local archives in England and Wales.

Archives Hub: www.archiveshub.ac.uk

This catalogues the contents of archives held in UK universities and colleges.

Aim 25: www.aim25.ac.uk

This catalogues the contents of many archives located within the M25.

Your supervisor will be able to provide more detailed information on some of the main archives relevant to those doing topics around your special subject.

Finding Secondary Sources

All subsequent analyses, in the form of books or articles, are secondary sources.

- Look for relevant reading on your special subject reading list
- Browse through the relevant category numbers in the library
- Browse the Sussex library catalogue using keyword search
- Look in the bibliographies of the books that you use, to see which books and sources other historians have used.

7. Writing up

The precise structure of your dissertation will vary according to your topic and style of writing. Your supervisor can give you more detailed advice with this, but an example formula is outlined below. You may also find it useful to look at some academic journal articles. These are usually around the same length as a dissertation. Ignore the content, and have a look at how the historian has structured his or her argument.

A dissertation will usually include the following:

Contents page

List of Abbreviations

| | |
|------------------------|--------|
| Introduction | [Page] |
| Chapter 1 [Title] | [x] |
| Sub-sections? | |
| Chapter 2 [Title] | [x] |
| Chapter 3 [Title] etc. | [x] |
| Conclusion | |
| Appendices | |
| Bibliography | |

Introduction

This defines precisely the question or questions that the dissertation will address and sets the study in context by analysing the historical literature. It must not be too long, as you want to reserve most of your words for outlining your own original research.

- Provide an engaging and interesting introduction to your topic. What is the dissertation about, and why it is important?
- You may want to mention here the sources that you're going to use and their strengths/weaknesses. Do they enable you to fully address the question you have chosen?
- You may want to set out how your argument will be structured. For example, 'In the first chapter a, b, and c will be discussed. Chapter two will focus upon x, y, and z,' etc. This should only be brief.
- Locate the work within the context of the broader historiography. What else has been written on or around this topic? What have the key debates been amongst historians working in this area? Is this a topic where there are many competing interpretations? Is there a scarcity of secondary literature that needs addressing?
- How does your approach differ from that of other historians? What gaps remain to be filled and how does your research help? What are the key questions addressed in the dissertation and what are you going to say that is new? In other words, what is your argument?

Main body of dissertation

This is the presentation of your argument

Most dissertations will need at least two or three chapters, although different subjects and approaches demand different types of structure. If necessary you can also provide subsections to each chapter, although be wary of making your text too bitty.

Each chapter should deal with a major aspect of the subject, and will usually correlate with your main research questions.

The chapters form the body of your dissertation and are the building blocks through which you develop your argument, through your presentation of the primary source material. Remember, you are constructing an argument, not just reporting the results of your research.

Conclusion

This should relate your conclusions to the broader historiographical debates outlined in your introduction. What have you found?

- Your conclusion is a vital part of your dissertation. It should draw everything together and reiterate your main argument.
- What has your research added to the sum of knowledge on this topic?
- Have you disproved someone else's thesis?
- Does your evidence support the work of another historian?
- Try to round off with a strong concluding paragraph that succinctly sums up your findings on the question you have posed.

Appendices

You may or may not want to use these. Appendices are a useful device for including important material that would make the argument difficult to follow if included in the main body of the text, for example, pictures, tables or details of oral history respondents. Don't include anything, even in an appendix, that isn't necessary for your argument. All appendices, tables, illustrations etc., must be labelled and their source acknowledged.

8. Presentation

A dissertation should conform to academic standards of presentation.

Your work is expected to be readable, clearly-expressed and correctly spelled. Scripts with significant numbers of typing errors, misspellings, use of unintelligible note-form or inadequate publication details in the bibliography will be penalised. Use the spell-check function on your computer.

Pages must be numbered consistently. You should use only one side of paper and the work must be double-spaced, in a 12-point typeface. Longer quotations of about sixty words or more may be separated from the main body of the text, indented and single-spaced. It is strongly advisable to print out drafts of your dissertation and work on the hard copy – rather than attempt to do all your editing on the computer screen.

It must be properly referenced, and contain a detailed bibliography.

References

References should be numbered in the text and written out in full at the bottom of the page as footnotes. Most word-processing packages have a facility for entering footnotes. You should reference every piece of evidence you present and should also reference key ideas and approaches drawn from the secondary literature. Don't include material in footnotes that advances your main argument. The proper place for this is the main body of the text.

The function of footnotes is to allow the reader to identify a book or locate a quotation, so they should be clear and consistent. Use the examples given in the History Referencing Guide which is available on the Department website.

Note that poor presentation will be penalised.

Bibliography

Presentation is important, and sloppy referencing will be penalised. The bibliography should list all of the materials used in the preparation of the dissertation, whether manuscripts, books, articles, websites or audio-visual materials.

The bibliography may be single spaced. Divide your sources according to the categories below:

Primary sources - manuscript

Sources should be listed under the different archives that you found them. You do not have to give the same kind of detail regarding the contents of the source that you gave in the footnotes – the numerical/letter reference for each source is fine.

Primary sources - published

If necessary this can be divided into subsections such as ‘Government and official publications’; ‘Newspapers and magazines’; ‘Diaries and memoirs’.

*Oral interviews**Secondary sources – published*

Books, articles and essays should be listed in alphabetical order, according to the author’s surname (anonymous printed sources should be listed by the first word of their title).

Secondary sources – unpublished

(for example, unpublished theses)

*Websites**Audio-visual material*

9. Rules and regulations

Word limit

The maximum dissertation length is 8,000 words. This does not include footnotes, bibliography, appendices, maps, illustrations, transcriptions of linguistic data, or tabulations of numerical or linguistic data and their captions.

Excessive length may be penalised. If the examiners consider that an unfair advantage has been gained by exceeding the given length for an assessment they will reduce the mark for that assessment by up to 10% of the marks available. There is not a 10% word limit margin around the length of a dissertation. Dissertations substantially below the word limit will not be formally penalised, but it is unlikely that they will demonstrate the required depth of research, knowledge and argument to attain a good mark.

Plagiarism

Be careful when making notes that you acknowledge direct quotations and the origin of significant ideas.

Plagiarism is a very serious offence and in the worst cases may lead to disqualification. Don’t do it!

Submission

It is your responsibility to check regulations in the Academic Office’s Examination and Assessment Handbook for Undergraduate Students for the current year (2014/2015). This document alone has the final say on regulations and you must follow its requirements to the letter concerning presentation, page numbering etc. You will also get information on

submission dates from the Academic Office (via your Study Direct pages) and it is your responsibility to find this out and keep to the deadline.

10. Final checklist

Have you...

- ☐ Had your title sheet signed by your supervisor?
- ☐ Checked when and where the dissertation needs to be handed in?
- ☐ Spell-checked your work?
- ☐ Double-checked for typos, grammatical mistakes etc?
- ☐ Read it through for any errors caused by last minute cutting and pasting (eg sentences not following on from each other, the use of Ibid etc)?
- ☐ Referenced all sources/quotations/tables/illustrations/appendices?
- ☐ Double-checked that your footnotes conform to the guidelines above?
- ☐ Included a list of abbreviations (if relevant)?
- ☐ Included a bibliography?
- ☐ Double spaced your work in 12-point typeface?
- ☐ Printed out two copies?